

services & information for new landholders



Do you own a small property in rural Victoria?

handling drought on a small property

When facing a drought, making the right decisions will benefit your animals, your land and your lifestyle. Planning is the key to handling difficult conditions.

Planning

Don't do anything before you gather important information and make some plans. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I have enough water to carry animals through until winter?
- Do I have the resources (money, time, equipment) to feed my animals on a daily basis for at least the next 6 months, or until adequate pasture is available?
- How much will it cost me?
- Is it worth keeping all of my animals until there is adequate paddock feed?
- What will it cost to replace my animals at the end of the drought?
- Will I be able to handle the emotional impact of selling my animals?

Water

This is the most important issue – a cow will drink up to 90 litres of water/day, a horse up to 50 litres a day and a sheep up to 9 litres a day. This coupled with evaporation over the hot summer months means that dams empty very quickly. Remember you may need to plan for no significant rain to fill your dam or tanks before winter.

DPI has tools to help you calculate water and feed requirements on the DPI website

(see DPI resources below). Water use guides are also provided in the information notes section of the DPI website, in the notes titled "How long will my dam water last?" and "How much water do I need?" Work out if your dam water will last through to at least May. If not, seek alternative water sources or sell your stock now. Just because it rains, that does not mean there will be adequate run-off to put water in your dam.

Feeding

Even if you have enough water to carry stock through, are you prepared to feed every day or second day for several months while the drought lasts? This can be very time consuming and a real tie to the farm, especially over holiday periods.

During extended dry periods, paddock feed becomes nutritionally inadequate for stock. Your animals will use up their fat reserves, resulting in obvious loss of weight and condition. Good feeding management decisions made early will benefit your animals, your land and your enjoyment of owning animals.

It is important to recognise limited feed availability well before your stock become skinny, weak and susceptible to nutritional disorders. Providing supplementary feed that is well balanced and meets the needs of your stock is necessary.

Energy, protein and fibre are the essential components of feed for your stock. Roughage, such as good quality, clean hay is needed if there is little or no grass in the paddock. This is very important if grains are being fed in order to balance your animal's diet so they don't get sick.

Commercially prepared rations offer convenience but can be expensive. Seek advice from the manufacturer or retailer on amounts to be fed. Supplementary feeding should begin when there is still reasonable pasture feed in the paddock, and before animals lose too much condition. Introduce new feeds gradually because sudden feed changes can cause death. Hay can always be fed as a supplement to grain to maintain adequate nutrition. Generally, allow two to three weeks to reach a full ration of grain. Check stock regularly, ideally each day. Low amounts of pasture availability may lead to stock grazing plants that are not usually part of their diet and may be toxic (eg. some weeds).

Hay – It is important to ration your hay supplies as soon as possible as hay will be extremely difficult to obtain in dry periods. You may need to feed grain to provide most of your animal's energy requirements. The introduction of weeds can be a problem with buying in feed, and samples should be inspected carefully for weed seeds.

However, it is not always possible to detect a potential problem, or even to refuse a feed on these grounds. One way to minimise a potential weed problem is to restrict feeding out of any suspect fodder to a limited number of paddocks. There are several issues regarding feeding and management of animals during drought which significantly increases the risk of importing new weeds onto farms. DPI's Landscape Protection portfolio has produced a brochure on this topic which can be accessed from the DPI website at www.dpi.vic.gov.au/weeds 'Weed Warning – Drought, Fire & Flood'.

Grain – Grain feeding is a specific skill. Grain needs to be introduced very gradually so animals don't get grain poisoning (acidosis). DPI produces two booklets on drought feeding for cattle and sheep, which are available for no charge, by contacting DPI's Call Centre on 136-186 or from your local DPI office. (Alternatively, individual chapters can be found online in the DPI Information Notes – see link below.) Read these books before commencing grain feeding as the main component of your animal's diet. If you have further queries, the Call Centre can put you in touch with your local Animal Health Officer for further information.

Your most realistic option may be to sell stock when the drought starts and replace them at the end of the drought or next Spring. You could save money, time, pasture and soil resources. There will be less stress on you and your family. At the very least you may decide to keep a core number of animals, such as your favourites or breeding stock, and sell the rest.

Costs

It could cost \$550 or more to feed a cow & calf for 6 months – not including your time and travel. It could cost two or three times more than this if you are purchasing grain by the bag rather than by the tonne. Work out if you can afford this or make alternative arrangements, preferably early.

Don't overgraze

Overgrazing pastures so that bare soil is visible increases the risk of your precious soil being blown away over the summer or washed away during summer thunderstorms. Your soil and pasture are valuable resources. Most of the important nutrients are in the topsoil; don't let it blow or wash onto someone else's property.

Decide how you will manage your animals and land. It may be better to confine your stock to a smaller area and hand-feed rather than having them waste energy wandering the entire property, further damaging the limited vegetation.

Animals may damage trees and other native vegetation if they are hungry, and allowing them to cause this type of destruction is not acceptable. You may consider fencing off, or covering trees to prevent this happening.

Animal health

The effects of parasites or disease on stock are often amplified in drought. Keep up your animal health program but remember stock weakened by drought face extra risks.

Seek professional advice before feeding your livestock fodder made from crop by-products or plant-waste that may have been exposed to chemicals. Minute quantities can create unacceptable levels of chemical residue in food for humans. This plant material includes vegetable by-products (eg. potato peel), crop waste (eg. corn trash) and by-products from the fruit-processing industry (eg. citrus pulp).

Legal obligations

You are legally responsible for the welfare of your animals including adequate nutrition and water. It is not acceptable to let stock die or suffer. If you have concerns about stock on neighbouring properties, or if you have any animal health related questions, contact the Animal Health Officer at your local DPI office.

DPI Resources

See: <http://www.dpi.vic.gov.au/drought/>

Information Notes (<http://www.dpi.vic.gov.au/dpi/nreninf.nsf/childdocs/-49A21C225110DAB74A2568B30004DB83-9DB564B1D158B03BCA256BC700835FFC?open>) cover topics such as:

- Drought Feeding and Management Of Beef Cattle
- Drought Feeding and Management Of Sheep
- Drought planning – Horses
- Stock Containment Areas & Water Supply for Stock Containment Areas
- How Long Will My Dam Water Last?
- Farm Water in Dry Times: A Check List
- "How much water do I need"?
- 'Weed Warning – Drought, Fire & Flood'
- Feed Budgets for Horses
- Horses, Drought and Winter – things to consider

Alternatively, visit <http://www.dpi.vic.gov.au/drought> click on Farming Information and scroll down to the section on Information Notes on Drought. Here you will find the notes above, as well as a wide range of short publications on various drought-related topics.

Alternatively, visit <http://www.dpi.vic.gov.au/drought> click on Farming Information and scroll down to the section on Information Notes on Drought. Here you will find the notes above, as well as a wide range of short publications on various drought-related topics.

DPI produces two booklets on drought feeding which are available for no charge by contacting the DPI Call Centre on 136-186 or from your local DPI office. These can be sent to your postal address.

Disclaimer

The advice provided in this publication is intended as a source of information only. The State of Victoria and its employees do not guarantee that the publication is without flaw of any kind or is wholly appropriate for your particular purposes and therefore disclaims all liability for any error, loss or other consequence which may arise from you relying on any information in this publication.

Published by: Department of Primary Industries, Victoria, Australia. © The State of Victoria, 2007. This publication is copyright. No part may be reproduced by any process except in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.
ISBN 978-1-74199-584-8 (Print)
ISBN 978-1-74199-585-5 (Online)

**For more information contact the DPI
Customer Service Centre on 136 186**

Visit: www.dpi.vic.gov.au/new-landholders

Email: new.landholders@dpi.vic.gov.au